DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 066 816 EA 004 535

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TITLE	Community Involvement in Decision-Making.
PUB DATE	17 Aug 72
NOTE	13p.; Speech given before National School Boards Association Summer Institute. (Hanover, New Hampshire, August 17, 1972)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Citizen Participation; *Community Involvement; *Decision Making; *Parent Participation; *Policy Formation; Politics; Power Structure; *Student Participation
IDENTIFIERS	Educational Reform

ABSTRACT

This report advocates increased participation of parents and students in the decisionmaking process. The author argues that of all the school constituents -- parents, students, teachers, administrators, and various citizen organizations and special interest groups -- parents and students have the least influence. Thus, the political balance of educational policymaking is tipped in favor of well-organized and well-placed special interest groups. The author suggests areas of involvement for both students and parents. (JF)

ED 066816

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Following is the text of remarks prepared by Harvey B. Scribner, Chancellor of the New York City public schools, for delivery before the 1972 Summer Institute of the National School Boards Association, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H., August 17, 1972, at a morning session beginning at 9:00 a.m.

Community Involvement in Decision-Making

In asking me to talk this morning on the subject of community involvement in school decision-making, the planners of this conference chose a topic which has strong appeal for me--and which frequently gets me into trouble.

I recall, for example, being invited last year by the supervisors' union in New York City--the Council of Supervisors and Administrators--to speak at their annual gathering on the topic of participatory democracy and the schools. I accepted the invitation, of course.

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Naively, perhaps, I prepared a speech on how the schools of America might begin to reform themselves in line with the notions of participation and democracy. Assuming that the principals and other supervisors of the New York City schools had given me this topic because they wanted to hear my thoughts on this current subject, I flew to the Bahamas, where the conference was held, and delivered my talk. I quickly learned that the travel ads for the Bahamas were wrong--it turned decidedly cool in the Bahamas immediately after that speech. But it warmed up considerably in New York City once the press published parts of that talk the next morning.

On the theory that if you don't have new ideas you should at least get a new audience, I'm going to make some similar observations this morning.

I want to preface some specific suggestions about parent and student involvement in school decision-making with some general comments about the need for what I call the "new politics" of educational leadership.

There is a good deal of rhetoric about school reform. It seems to me that the kind of reform most needed today is not the kind of reform designed to bring about new programs in the schools--

as badly needed as new programs are--but, rather, the kind of reform which alters the way educational decisions and policies are made.

The new politics of educational leadership which I have in mind would emphasize the involvement of parents, communities, and students in decision-making. By contrast, the old politics of educationa decision-making, which generally characterizes the vast majority of the school systems of this country, emphasizes decision-making by special interest groups.

By politics, I do not mean the party politics of Republicans and Democrats, or the election activities of the Nixons and the McGoverns. Rather, I mean politics in the broad sense--those relationships which both bind together and separate all those groups and agencies which have interests in the public schools.

All school systems are characterized by a set of political balances which define how the constituencies of the schools relate to each other. Some groups wield power on some issues but not on others. Other groups are frustrated on the majority of issues because of a relative powerlessness. And the in-groups can be identified

with relative ease in most school systems.

This is not to say that the raw pressures of contending groups of special interests determine educational policy in all instances. Nor is it to advocate that boards of education or school administrators act politically so as to please one group of constituents and then another.

But it is to say that all education systems, small and large, rural and urban, develop direction and policy in part as the result of the delicate and sometimes indelicate balances between and among the various interests of the schools. It is also to say that the decisions of school boards and superintendents affect those balances.

School boards and school administrators must necessarily be aware--by knowledge or instinct--of the various forces which play on the schools for which they are responsible. They should also be aware of--and be guided by--the aspirations and needs of people whose lives and opportunities are determined in large measure by the schools. Which is to say that I believe that the interests of the public should have highest priority in education policy, and that members of the public--

parents and students--should have a genuine voice in shaping the policy.

To advocate the practice of a new politics in education is to advocate a difference of leadership. The difference lies in where we who manage the schools place ourselves--with the forces for change, or with the forces of status quo.

School boards and school administrators make decisions every day which touch the political balances which form the context of the schools. Occasionally, we deliberately upset those balances and create new ones--and the public benefits. All too often, in my judgment, we do not upset the established balances, and the public loses.

What is meant by "community involvement" in educational decision-making?

To me it means participation by the various constituents of the schools in the making of decisions and choices that affect them.

Who are the constituents of the schools? They are parents, students, teachers, administrators, and various citizen organizations and special interest groups.

Which of these constituencies, generally speaking, have the least influence over the schools? My answer is parents and students--the people who own the schools, and the people who are the clients of the schools. Thus do the political balances of educational policymaking generally tip in favor of the well-organized and well-placed special interest, and thus do these balances work against the interests of parents and students despite the rhetoric which surrounds the so-called "public" schools.

This is the age of the consumer, and hopefully the people of this country have begun to realize that the public schools do indeed belong to the public. If there is one factor which is creating a headache for the established interests in public education, it is the fact that the public--or part of it at least--is coming to realize that it owns the schools. This development may prove to be the best single thing that's happened to public education in many years.

The blunt fact is that many parents and citizens are frustrated, apathetic, alienated or angry with the schools they own because they lack

access to the places where decisions are made that affect them and their children.

It is equally fair to say, in my judgment, that many students are turned off by the schools because the schools fail to practice the same brand of democracy which they preach. This, too, relates to the question of involvement.

Alan Westin, in a report on secondary schools, has warned of that:

> "the great majority of students in secondary schools--the supposedly 'silent majority'--is becoming increasingly frustrated and alienated by school. They do not believe that they receive individual justice or enjoy the right to dissent, or share in critical rule-making that affects their lives.'

If this is true, Westin said,

> "then our schools may be turning out millions of students who are not forming a strong and reasoned

allegiance to a democratic political system because they receive no meaningful experience with such a democratically-oriented system in their daily lives in school."

Of all public institutions, the school should be a laboratory of democracy.

I would urge that every high school involve students and staff in collaborative efforts to devise--for each school--internal systems of rule-making, discipline and review. The system of governance would differ in structure and in style from school to school, would be subject to periodic review and alteration, and would bring together students and staff as members of a common school community. Self-designed and self-administered, the governance system of the school would thus be a working model of democracy, as well as a vital component of the learning process.

I would urge all school systems to develop and publish statements of student rights and responsibilities. I would recommend that students participate in the drafting of such documents.

I would urge all school boards and school administrators to make regular use of students on advisory bodies and planning groups--not as token students, but as spokesman for that group of people most directly affected by the nature and quality of the schools.

I would strongly recommend that school systems thoroughly involve parents and other citizens as legitimate partners in decision-making. This means involving them in the design, operation and evaluation of school programs. This means consultation and hearings on proposed policy. This means encouraging volunteer parents to work in classrooms. This means schools genuinely open to parents year-round, and not just during American Education Week.

Involvement means parents--as many of them are in New York City--actively engaged in the selection of principals. In New York City, high school students also are involved in the principal-selection process.

None of this involvement diminishes the authority of school boards, or their legal responsibility. But it does open the decision-making process to the public interests as well as to the special interests who tend to dominate public education in too many ways.

Educational leaders who understand and practice the "new politics" would seek to reform the schools by involving (not ignoring) the newly recognized constituents--parents, citizen groups, and students--in the process of reform.

Educational leaders of the "new politics" would align themselves instinctively with those who recognize the shortcomings of the schools, rather than aligning themselves with the advocates of the status quo.

These educational leaders would realize that many of our most cherished educational concepts are now outmoded and impractical. Can we continue neatly to separate academic education and vocational education? Can we tell a student today that the only way to learn is to sit in a classroom? These false distinctions benefit adults, but not necessarily the young--and educational leadership of the "new politics" would recognize this.

These leaders would view collective bargaining contracts as agreements to be honored, but also as agreements which expire. The public, in my judgment, can no longer afford to allow its representatives at the bargaining table to negotiate new agreements on top of old agreements--without questioning the content of the old agreement.

These "new politics" leaders in education would devise new measures of education based on knowledge and skills and attitudes, rather than accepting without question the credentials game.

Most important, these leaders would view themselves as partners with parents in educational policymaking--and as public employees who are accountable to the public.

> "It is easy," Alan Westin has said,
>
> "to be swept along by emotional cries of
>
> 'no appeasement' or 'non-negotiable demands.'
>
> But if either of those extreme positions
>
> remains substantially unmodified in the
>
> coming years, our school systems are headed
>
> for disaster."

Parents and students do not necessarily possess greater wisdom than school professionals or school board members. But they deserve to be involved in decision-making that affects their lives.

One fact overrides all others: Parents and students have rights that derive from ownership of a public institution, and from individual opportunity in a society which places high value on formal education. These are the rights of owners and consumers, and for too long these rights have not been recognized.

> "We want a society," John Gardner has said,
> "that is sufficiently honest and open-minded
> to recognize its problems, sufficiently
> creative to conceive of new solutions,
> and sufficiently purposeful to put those
> solutions into effect."

Those who would reform the public schools of this country need to practice a new politics in decision-making which is honest and open-minded, creative and purposeful. They need a vision of what public education could be, and might become. They need to be thick-skinned,

and willing to risk controversy. And they need to know in their bones that there is no greater gamble these days than to stand still.

We who are charged with leadership responsibilities in public education should not be satisfied with bequeathing to our successors school systems with essentially the same political balances which we inherited.

Our objective, instead, should be to deliver to those who succeed us systems of public education in which the balances have begun to swing toward the owners and the consumers of public education--because this is the change which is the prerequisite of reform.

Hopefully, there's a new day coming in public education. Hopefully the leaders of the schools will not only welcome it, but help to give it birth.

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